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ABSTRACT

Behavioral differences between Soviet and American foreign language teachers are examined as a basis for improving intercultural understanding and promoting more productive work in the bicultural classroom. The observations are made by American language teachers who have known teachers from both countries as both students and peers. Specific differences are found in the areas of course organization, perceived role as teachers, classroom conduct, and professional relations. Soviet teachers are more likely to organize lessons around a portion of material while American teachers tend to design lessons around a specific guiding objective. The Soviet teacher views his role as imparting knowledge to students, while an American often sees his role as teaching students how to use skills. A Soviet teacher may interpret his own or a student's lack of knowledge on a specific topic as a weakness or lack of control, while an American teacher does not necessarily interpret lack of knowledge negatively. Soviet teachers expect rote memorization, assign large amounts of homework, translate directly, and correct freely. American teachers, on the other hand, rely much less on memorization and homework, emphasize translation of key words rather than difficult or unusual words, and focus on effort rather than accuracy. Soviet-American teaching differences find their way into textbooks and classrooms in other forms. (MSE)

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AMERICAN-SOVIET DIFFERENCES
IN TEACHER PERSPECTIVES AND BEHAVIOR
AMONG TEACHERS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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[Abstract: This paper addresses the issue of cross-cultural teaching differences, in particular between Soviet and American teachers of foreign language, although many of the attributes of foreign language teachers could probably be extended to teachers of other subjects. The specific areas of differences are found to be in course organization, perceived role as teachers, classroom conduct, and professional relations. The purpose of the paper is to provide a base for cross-cultural understanding for teachers and students from both cultures who share classrooms.]

While it may be difficult to assert that teaching behaviors can be tied directly to political systems, it does appear there are differences in the ways in which teachers from one culture or another approach the classroom, instructional materials, and their students. These differences range from personal mannerisms, to general expectations, to lesson assignments.¹ An

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understanding of these differences can do much to allow students and teachers to appreciate cultural biases and to understand why nonunderstandings occur. The following article recounts behavioral differences between teachers with Soviet training and teachers of American extraction noted by the authors over several years of teacher supervision as well as experience as students taught by teachers from both countries.²

ORGANIZATION

One of the most striking differences between American and Soviet teachers is the manner in which they organize their lessons. To the American sitting in a Soviet teacher's classroom, lessons appear to be organized not around some guiding objective but around a portion of knowledge (pages 16-20 or the grammar section). However, to say that there is no organizing principle to a Soviet teacher's lesson is usually a failure on the part of the student to see beyond the class itself. Soviet lectures tend to be "macro-organized", whereas American lectures tend to be "micro-organized."

The Soviet method of organization is larger in scope and takes in not just a class, but an entire course and even in some cases a multi-year sequence.³ Once a course is organized, individual lessons within the course are not further organized, but are simply parts of the larger whole. Therefore, there is no specific beginning and ending point to each classroom hour. There is, however, a definite beginning and ending point to each course. Thus, a given lesson in a literature course could conceivably end (because of time limitations) in the middle of a discussion of a particular author. In a Soviet classroom it would be understood that the discussion would be continued during the next class. The course is indeed organized --

there will be a specified number of authors and works discussed. However, to the American student, who is conditioned to a hierarchically- and topically-organized curriculum and therefore to the precept that if one starts an author in one period, one should finish a predetermined segment of the author's work or the entire discussion of the author during that period, the Soviet teacher's class will seem unorganized.

The principal reason that such organization appears unorganized to American students is that while most Soviet teachers use a sequential organization in planning courses, most American teachers are trained to organize their materials and presentations in a hierarchal fashion. That is, each course must have a definite beginning and end. Within the course, each class session must have a definite beginning and end. Within each class session, each major discussion must have a beginning and end. The extreme of hierarchal presentation is the by-word of military instructors: tell the troops what you will teach them, teach them that, then tell them what it is that you told them -- beginning, body of material, end. This type of organization will result in certain activities which are not present in a sequential organization. For example, at the beginning of a class there will often be a short summarization of the previous class, so that the students can place the material about to be presented within the hierarchal framework of the entire course. There will also be a short summary of the current period's activity at the end of class for the same purpose. The class that ends in the middle of a discussion with the words, "Nu, vse, druz'ja" ["Well, that's it!"] strikes the American student as one which has ended unexpectedly, as if the teacher just realized that it was time to go and ran out of time to end the class properly, i.e. with some kind of wind-down for which the American

student is waiting.

TEACHER ROLES

Another major difference between American and Soviet teachers would appear to be the role that teachers assign themselves in the classroom. The Soviet teacher views himself as a knower of a prescribed set of knowledge or facts, his role being to impart as much as knowledge as possible to the student in the time frame assigned to the classroom (including, of course, homework time). The overall purpose of education and goal of the Soviet teacher is to promote "a comprehensive understanding and effective assimilation of information."⁴ This is not a new phenomenon. Since the earliest development of Soviet schools teachers have aimed to give "...measurable quantities of fact-learning."⁵ For this reason sociology lectures will often consist of litanies of statistics and grammar lessons will be replete with statements of rules. Much literature has appeared in print in the Soviet Union on the need for Soviet teachers to be knowledgeable. This is particularly so nowadays, since "the rapid development of the natural and technical sciences has increased substantially the volume of information that students must absorb."⁶ Especially recently there has been much interest in improving the qualifications of teachers. Almost always, the need for better qualifications for teachers refers to greater knowledge of subject matter being taught.⁷

The American teacher, on the other hand, usually views himself as a knower of skills, his role being to "teach students how to think". Rather than trying to instill habits in their students, American teachers are trying to turn them into capable problem solvers. A quick perusal of almost any journal

for teachers will attest to this. For example, the June 1983 issue of Phi Delta Kappan devoted three articles out of seven to this topic alone.⁸ As a teacher of skills, the American teacher accepts the notion that students may forget facts. The important factor is whether or not they remember the method. As long as the method is remembered, they will always be able to determine the facts on their own. The essence of the difference between American and Soviet teachers is that the Soviet teacher focuses on teaching material, the American teacher on teaching behavior.

CLASSROOM CONDUCT

One result of this difference is that since the Soviet teacher's role is that of knower and conveyer of facts, if the teacher lacks knowledge of a specific point raised by a student, he/she becomes embarrassed and sometimes even will invent an answer, so as not to appear inept. To the Soviet teacher saying "I don't know" is a sign of weakness. A teacher who does not know the answer to a question is not only a bad teacher but one who will lose control over the classroom. According to Stanislav Shatsky, a leading educator in the formative stages of Soviet education, it is "the realization that adults know more...which should provide the basis for adults' influence upon children."⁹

On the other hand, since the American teacher is not supposed to be a repository of facts but an assistant in helping students to learn specific skills, lack of knowledge is not necessarily interpreted either by teacher or student negatively. In fact, teachers in training are often told that saying "I don't know, but I'll find out" is a sign of strength.

Another result of this difference is that Soviet teachers will require a

great deal of memorization on the part of their students and will tend to add asides to the lessons, because those facts which prompt these asides are also important. Observably absent from the Soviet classroom is the ubiquitous American open-book test. In language teaching teachers will expect students to memorize, know, and be able to state rules. Explanation of the rule itself may occupy a prominent place in the lesson. In fact, according to Shatsky, "the largest share of classroom time is spent by teachers on explanations."¹⁰ Teachers will tend to ask students to complete fill-in exercises, in which they show that they know the rules, and use repetitive exercises of all kinds in the classroom. After all, povtorenie -- mat' učenie [Repetition is the mother of learning or practice makes perfect.]. Grammar tends to be the focus of much of this repetition and rule explanation -- "tsentral'noj zadači v obučenii ustnoj reči javljaetsja aktivizacija znakoobrazatel'nyx modelej, t.e. grammatičeskix struktur" ["the central task in oral training is activization of base models, i.e. grammatical structures"]¹¹ -- and recitation of poetry is very frequently inserted into classroom exercises .

(Interestingly, repetition as a classroom exercise is not replicated in repetition in instruction. A Soviet teacher typically proceeds step-by-step. Therefore, while rules may be expanded upon or detailed even beyond the students' desire to know details, word-for word repetition of material covered by the teacher is rare. For example, when a Soviet teacher or lecturer gives a list of anything in a series, he/she will rarely repeat the series, whereas American teachers will almost always repeat the series. For the sequentially organized Soviet teacher this series would appear to be simply a few steps in a sequence of many steps. For the hierarchically organized American teacher

this series would be a sub-hierarchy and, therefore, would require greater attention.)

In contrast to Soviet teachers, American teachers will be less interested in what students have memorized, may well assign less homework, sometimes to the consternation of students who consider homework important, and may be more interested in what students can do with whatever amount they have learned. Classroom activities themselves tend to be less repetitive and more based on communication, although the latter statement is made with a modicum of caution, since communicative competence is not yet the mode in all American classrooms. Nevertheless, grammar quite often fades into a role of less significance with American teachers, as does recitation and litanizing in any form. This difference may be due in part to changes in approaches to elementary education which have occurred in the United States in the past century. Extensive memorization of poetry or anything else is rarely a form of education used in today's American elementary schools. Grammar is also no longer taught in its traditional forms in many classrooms. In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, grammar is taught, hence the greater insistence by Soviet teachers on "taught" labels, such as adverb, noun, accusative case. In fact, Soviet teachers often find the need for these labels so strong that in a class conducted entirely in Russian they will translate the label into English for their American students, so that the student will fully understand which grammatical feature is being discussed.

It is interesting to note an additional difference in the use of translation by Soviet and American teachers. In addition to the Soviet tendency to translate grammar terms, there is also a tendency to translate

"difficult" or unusual words. Ironically, many of these are loan-words from the Romance or Germanic languages, which have also been borrowed into English, so that the two words are often cognates. These cognates will almost never be translated by American teachers, whose translational proclivities extend to translation of key words. These key words will often assist the student in following whatever argument the teacher is developing. It might be useful to point out that although the American approach may appear to be the most "sensible" and the most helpful to students, it is, in our opinion, the most deleterious, since by providing the student with the argument development in English, the teacher is depriving them of the necessity to listen to and extract meaning from the Russian (or whatever foreign language is being taught).

Within the classroom there are different strategies for error correction, depending on the origin of the teacher. Soviet teachers are very conscientious in correcting all errors, because they believe that students must know these things. American teachers, however, being more communication-based, will frequently let errors pass, if meaning is clear. The types of errors particularly corrected for by Soviet teachers are often different than those corrected for by American teachers, as is the timing and manner of error correction. Because of their emphasis on "correctness," Soviet teachers tend to correct an error, when it is made, after which they will respond to the question being asked or the statement being made. American teachers, however, will answer the question or respond to a statement first and correct grammar or pronunciation afterwards.

Soviet teachers also tend to correct students in front of other students,

frequently listing students' deficiencies are: "you need to improve your pronunciation" or "you need to work on stress" or "you always make that mistake, this is the third time I've corrected you on that." This manner of error correction is considered to be one of concern and assistance to the student who should be interested in education as it relates to his self-improvement. Obviously, the teacher cares about and has been properly attentive to the student, if he/she has ascertained what errors are consistently made or what the student's general weaknesses are.

However, American students look upon such correction as criticism, and it is a rare American teacher who would consider making corrections in this manner. Overall weaknesses would usually be pointed out to individual students in private, after class, or during a consultation. The wording would emphasize not the student but the effort. For example, instead of saying "you need to work on your pronunciation", the American teacher is more apt to say "we need to work on your pronunciation" or "spending some time in the lab with pronunciation tapes might help you".

The general impression is that the Soviet teacher views him/herself as an authority figure and in turn is viewed as such by Soviet students. Overall, most teachers encourage convergent thinking, the result of the emphasis on memorization. In language literature classes the emphasis is not on students' opinions but on the ability to state the various critics' opinions. The American teacher's proclivity not to ask what happened in a novel or story but to ask for a student's emotional reaction to a work or a student's personal opinion about the meaning of the work would be considered neither scholarly nor germane in most Soviet classrooms. Interestingly, this dichotomy of

approaches appears to be widening, not lessening. At least, more and more American teachers are beginning to consider teaching divergent thinking skills as equal to or more important than convergent thinking skills.¹²

Perhaps part of this difference results from the way in which students are viewed in the two cultures. In the Soviet Union even adult students are viewed as beings in which a certain amount of material is to be inculcated. The responsibility for learning lies with the teacher. Hence, there is greater teacher direction and often more teacher talk, since when a teacher is talking a teacher feels as if he/she is teaching, but not so when he/she is listening. Additionally, the purpose of education is more ideological than in the U.S., the intent being the education of the entire person, of the "new man who participates actively in the construction of communism, who is a collectivist, an internationalist, and a champion of communist ideals."¹³ This goal is perhaps best summarized by N. Kuzin and M. Kommaravaja: "Ešče na zare sovetsoj vlasti V. I. Lenin nazval učitel'stvo glavnoj armiej socialističeskogo prosveščeniya i prizval ego svjazat' svoju dejatel'nost' s partijej, s propagandoj žiznneutverzdajuščix idej naučnogo kommunizma. Etomu velikomu, neperexodjaščemu zavetu sovetskie učitelja vseгда byli verny. Takimi oni javljajutsja teper'. Takimi budut i vpred'." ["Back at the dawn of Soviet power, V.I. Lenin called teachers the main army of socialist enlightenment, and called on them to link their occupation with the party, with the propaganda for the vital idea of scientific communism. To this great everlasting testament Soviet teachers have always been and will remain faithful.]"¹⁴

In the U.S. adult students in particular are viewed as clients. The instructor owes them information but cannot command them to complete certain

activities, or criticize them if their efforts do not match expectations. The responsibility for learning lies within the students. As clients, they can learn or not learn the material for which they have engaged the teacher. Also, there is little concern for the overall development of the student, except in the very early primary grades, where some attention is paid to socialization.

The homework assigned, too, reflects this difference. Soviet teachers tend to assign homework which requires students to spend time memorizing information. American teachers tend to assign homework which requires students to spend time analyzing information.

Soviet and American differences find their way into textbooks and into classrooms in a variety of forms. One typical feature of Soviet textbooks is the appearance of a grammar rule with the warning "Don't forget!" For Americans such a warning seems insulting, and, while it occasionally appears, is certainly not a common feature of American language textbooks. Along the same lines, in the classroom Soviet teachers tend to tell students "You already know that." They consider this a way of reassuring their students. However, American students can find such a statement to be berating, in the sense of "What's the matter with you? You forgot this." American teachers tend to reassure their students in other ways, more along the lines of transactional analysis.

Classroom behavior itself is perhaps the most readily observable difference if one attends classes in both countries. In the Soviet Union the name and patronymic is the usual means of addressing a teacher. Standing to

show respect at the beginning of class is expected. Teachers are always professionally attired. The norm is no joking or laughing in the treatment of the subject matter. However, whispering is quite acceptable, within limits, and cheating is not especially frowned upon. In the United States, on the other hand, use of first names of teachers is not a sign of disrespect, but of collegiality, of common interests. Standing is not expected, and there is no disrespect implied when students remain seated, when a teacher enters the room. Teachers, particularly at the college level, will frequently conduct class dressed in jeans, stocking feet, or other attire that would shock their Soviet counterparts. However, while the atmosphere appears more relaxed than that in a Soviet university, there are unspoken norms in the U. S. as well. Whispering is considered disrespectful, and most teachers will not permit it. Cheating is considered dishonest, is prohibited by school regulations, and is punished by teachers who notice it.

The question of cheating is an interesting one, and one that demands some explanation and rumination. It would appear to relate to the cultural differences in socialization. In America much emphasis is placed on individualism, and cheating is a sign of an individual's lack of responsibility in preparing himself for a test. Also, individual property is highly respected in the United States. In the category of property one must include an individual's ideas, so-called intellectual property. Cheating could be considered tantamount to stealing the property, or ideas, of others. In the Soviet Union, however, more emphasis is placed on collective activity and far less on individual activity and property. There seems to be some concern as well that people should learn how to manipulate the system, cheating being one method. Also, if everyone cheats, it certainly becomes

"ill-advised" for any individual student not to cheat. From the teachers' point of view, there is an additional impetus to ignoring cheating. Not only is cheating the norm, but since teachers themselves cheated as students, they feel they cannot punish their students for doing the same. Nor is cheating a matter of student ability. Even the most capable students can be found to rely upon their špagalki (crib sheets) and not feel any shame or negative social pressure, as an American student would. One might conjecture that the impossibly vast amounts of facts that Soviet students are required to memorize might inevitably lead to cheating as a matter of academic survival.

Joking and laughing over subject matter is a phenomenon perhaps peculiar to those countries in which the student is considered a customer. As a customer the student must enjoy himself and must be satisfied with the product. That does not mean that the American student and teacher understand the subject at a lesser level or that they take the subject lightly. It is simply a relaxed approach to instruction. As a result the relationship that develops between student and teacher tends to be more of an equal partnership. (However, at a graduate level we have often observed more equal collegiality between Soviet teachers and students than between American teachers and students.) If one were to summarize classroom atmospheres, it might be reasonable to state that Soviet classrooms are work-oriented with relatively passive students, whereas American classrooms are relaxed with relatively active students.

As a result of the more personal approach to instruction, American teachers are more likely to try to individualize their classrooms and courses, seeking ways students learn best; whereas, Soviet teachers are more likely to

decide that in the case of a slow-learning student the problem is not the methodology, but the student. Punishments may be prescribed, greater amounts of homework demanded, or a strict regime (dressirovka) established. The most obvious instance of this in the Soviet Union is in the cases of learning disabled children. According to Soviet teachers interviewed by Professor Janice Gibson, there are no learning disabled children in the U.S.S.R., only lazy ones, although there is a Faculty of Defectology for children with obvious impairments, particularly physical handicaps.¹⁵ This same attitude is often displayed by emigrant teachers who first begin to teach American students. The results can be disastrous, with Soviet teachers becoming more demanding and American students more frustrated and angry as time goes on without improvement in proficiency, particularly in the case of students who may be dyslexic, who are ear, not sight, learners, or who display a learning style in direct opposition to that of the teacher or materials.

Among American teachers of a wide variety of subjects there has been much recent interest in learning styles. Although there is emphasis in Soviet pedagogical materials on the need for teachers to take into account the individual character of each student, this is usually in reference to vospitanie (moral development) and not to obrazovanie (education). With the great emphasis in modern American schools on learning disabilities and arranging instruction to match student abilities and disabilities (even though in many cases the actual implementation of individualized processes is still quite crude) American students have come to expect courses which are individual student oriented. As a result, they do not understand why their Soviet teachers will not individualize their lessons in the way to which they are often accustomed, while Soviet teachers do not understand why their

students are failing to learn.

In contrast to the focus of Soviet teachers which would appear to be on children and those child-like attributes found in all learners, with students being held responsible for their own learning, the focus of American teachers appears to be on adults and the adult-like attributes found in all learners. Blame for nonlearning is not automatically placed on the student, but rather, causes for the nonlearning are searched out. Sometimes the "fault" lies with the student, sometimes with the teaching methodology, and sometimes with a learning disability. These learning disabilities are more and more frequently being actively addressed, with the result usually being an adapted program of study, although, ironically, there is some evidence that hard work in the Soviet pattern can overcome many disabilities, including dyslexia.¹⁶

PROFESSIONAL RELATIONS

There are also noticeable differences in the professional relationships between Soviet and American teachers. In general, the Soviet behavioral pattern can be said to be collective in nature, the American collegial in nature. Specifically, Soviet teachers like to gather together and work out teaching strategies in unison. Within this collective there will usually be some authority figures. The collective is not one of multi-lateral negotiation, but one which is top-down organized. Although there is collective effort in determining teaching behavior and activity, the general tendency is not to spontaneously share materials. American teachers, on the other hand, seek out for support individual teachers, often selecting them for reasons of personal compatibility. They particularly like to share what they know and whatever materials they have successfully developed and expect the

same behavior from their colleagues. However, unlike their Soviet counterparts, they will usually insist on their own methodology and curriculum and resent any efforts at a collective methodology or curriculum.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the differences between Soviet and American teachers can be delineated along the lines of course organization, perceived teacher roles, classroom conduct, and professional relations. Understanding of these differences by teachers and students from both cultures would perhaps lead to more productive learning environments in a bi-cultural classroom. This paper has sought to address the topic of cultural differences with particular reference to teachers of foreign languages. However, many of the attributes discussed might well apply to a variety of disciplines. This is a little-researched topic, which would benefit from further study.¹⁸

ENDNOTES

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1. We would like to point out that we are not referring in this article to proclivities, if any exist, of American versus Soviet teachers for specific methodologies. Rather, we are referring to teacher behavior itself and classroom expectations. We realize that we have couched our observations in generalities. As such, one or another statement may not apply to any number of individual teachers. We would also be remiss in not noting that there are Soviet teachers who display some of the attributes of American teachers, and vice versus. We feel somewhat comfortable in generalizing, however, since the tendencies we have observed appear at their strongest in recent emigrants and in teachers currently teaching in the Soviet Union. We would welcome a Soviet view on our observations.

2. We would like to point out to the reader that in no way are we ascribing values to the various differences mentioned. Obviously, as American teachers we have our preferences in teaching behaviors, and these preferences may be unintentionally reflected from time to time.

3. The tendency of Soviet schools to teach all subjects in parallel sequences over several years was cited in William Medlin, Soviet Education Programs (Washington, D.C.: Dept. of HEW, 1960), p. 203. This same principle of sequential accumulation of knowledge was referenced more recently in B. Remennikov et al., USSR: Education, Science, and Culture (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978).
4. Remennikov, 93.
5. Medlin, 202.
6. Remennikov, 93.
7. See the 1985 and later issues of Bulleten' ministerstva vysshego i srednogo obrazovaniya SSSR.
8. See Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 6, No. 10: Edward de Bono, "The Direct Teaching of Thinking as a Skill", pp. 703-708; Jerry L. Brown, "On Teaching Thinking Skills in the Elementary and Middle School," pp. 709-714; Anon. "Why in the World: Using Television to Develop Critical Thinking Skills," pp. 715-716.
9. S. Shatsky: A Teacher's Experience (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1981), 73.
10. Ibid., 234.
11. T. I. Nefedova, "Kommunikativno-sintaktičeskie modeli povtora slovoformy prezensa (v svyazi s usvoeniem upotrebleniya nemeckix form vremeni učaščimsja

srednej skoli)" in I. M. Podberezin, ed., Puti povysenija urovnja usvoenija znanij v skole. (Kalinin: Kalinin State University, 1973), 83.

12. John Bushman. Studies in Classroom Interaction. [Doctoral Dissertation] (Urbana, Ill; University of Illinois, 1971.)

13. Remennikov, 13.

14. N. K. Kuzin and M. N. Kommakovaja. Skola na sovremennom etape. (Moscow: Pedagogika, 1977), 215.

15. Gibson, Journal of Experimental Psychology 47, 191-196.

16. See Donald Lyman, Making the Words Stand Still, reviewed in Psychology Today, August 1986, p. 73.

17. This characteristic is perhaps at the heart of the current movement among some American foreign language teachers to reject the ACTFL test standards for fear that such standards will create a "national curriculum", which they find anathema, as would probably a great many American teachers. A national curriculum, however, is currently more or less a fait accompli in the U.S.S.R. and the American abhorrence of such would probably not be readily understood by Soviet teachers.

18. One study which has been done of cross-cultural differences on a variety of topics is: Boris Shekhtman and Natalia Lord, Mark Smith's Diary. (Available from the Foreign Service Institute.)

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